

# **Do Employment and Type of Exit from Cash Assistance Influence Child Maltreatment among Families Leaving *Temporary Assistance to Needy Families?***

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## **Statement of the Research Problem**

In 1997, the United States federal government replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), a program that provides time-limited cash assistance to poor families with the expectation that the parents in the family will rapidly enter into competitive employment and attain self-sufficiency. Families who fail to comply with the employment services requirements of TANF are subject to sanctions, which result in the reduction or loss of their cash assistance. Families exit from TANF either voluntarily, through entry into the workforce or exceeding the income threshold for the program, or involuntarily, as a result of sanctions, reaching the time-limit for which they can receive benefits, or through some other administrative procedure. The transition from TANF, whether voluntary or involuntary, can be a critical period as families move from financial support through cash assistance to supposed self-sufficiency. The strain of this transition and the possible negative effects on children is the purpose of this study.

The relationship between poor families and the child welfare system is well established. Many families who are referred for child protective services are current or recent recipients of cash assistance (Paxon & Waldfogel, 2002). One theory as to why there is such a disproportionate representation of poor families in the child welfare system is that the distress caused by financial hardship leads to incidences of abuse or neglect (McLoyd, 1990). The well-being of children is an important, yet little acknowledged objective when considering the reasons government provides a modicum of financial support to poor families. Areas of child well-being that are affected by poverty include physical health, cognitive ability, school achievement (Leiter & Johnson, 1997), and emotional and behavioral outcomes (Scannapieco & Connell Carrick, 2005).

Furthermore, child maltreatment can have both short-term and long-term negative effects, including medical problems, cognitive and behavior problems, physical problems, and socio-emotional difficulties (for a review, see Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2007).

This study examines two specific factors which are believed to have an effect on the relationship between a family's exit from TANF and their subsequent involvement with the child welfare system. These two factors are the type exit from cash assistance experienced by the family and the amount of income the mother earns from competitive employment following the family's exit from TANF. Involvement with the child welfare system refers to cases which resulted in an indicated or substantiated finding of abuse or neglect. The population for this study is families from Cuyahoga County, Ohio, who exited TANF between 1999 and 2002.

### **Research Background and Hypotheses**

There are two main research questions examined in this study. The first research question is "does the type of exit from cash assistance (voluntary or involuntary) affect the incidence of child maltreatment?" This question explores the effects of involuntary exits, defined as sanctions, time limits, and failed redeterminations, on subsequent child maltreatment events as opposed to those families who exit cash assistance through voluntary means, the majority of cases which are due to employment income that exceeds program limits (Acs & Loprest, 2004). While there has been some empirical support showing that families who experience a sanction are at increased risk of an investigation of child maltreatment (Ovwigbo, Leavitt, & Born, 2003; Shook, 1998), the evidence regarding a substantiated finding is by no means conclusive (Shook Slack, Lee, & Berger, 2007). When controlling for demographic, economic, and environmental factors, being penalized through a sanction is not necessarily a significant predictor of open supervision for child maltreatment (Nam, Meezen, & Danziger, 2006). The type of sanctions may also affect the outcome of subsequent involvement with the child welfare system. Using state-level data, Paxson and Waldfogel (2003) found a significant relationship between the existence of full family sanctions in a state (as opposed to partial sanctions) and the rate of substantiated child welfare cases, suggesting that loss of all cash assistance may have a more dramatic effect on the economic hardship of the family. This is especially relevant in this study, as families in Ohio experience a termination of all benefits as a result of their first sanction.

While the effects of sanctions have been explored, the relationship between time-limited exits and maltreatment since the passage of welfare reform has not been thoroughly examined. In one of the few studies that have addressed time limits, Paxson and Waldfogel (1999) found that states with pre-TANF waivers containing work requirements, time limits, or both were associated with substantial decreases in child abuse, suggesting the push to enter employment served as a protective factor. However, the effects of time limits haven't been fully examined in the post-TANF era. Given the

lack of research on time limits and the contradictory findings on sanctions, the following hypothesis is tested here: Families that exit cash assistance due to involuntary termination of benefits will experience a greater risk of child maltreatment during the two year period following their first exit than families who exit cash assistance as a result of voluntary termination.

The second research question examined in this study is “do employment and employment income affect the incidence of child maltreatment?” Given welfare reform’s emphasis on self-sufficiency through competitive employment and earned income, examining the relationship between employment and child maltreatment is an important one. While there have been several studies that have previously examined this relationship, the results have been mixed. There is evidence that for some welfare leavers, the likelihood of experiencing a child maltreatment investigation or indicated finding may be moderated by parental employment (Shook, 1999) and that any employment, regardless of income earned, can lessen the risk of child welfare involvement (Paxson & Waldfogel, 1999). In their 2003 analysis of data from the Illinois Family Study, Shook Slack and colleagues found that families who left welfare and were employed were significantly less likely to experience an indicated child maltreatment finding than families who remained on welfare (Shook Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Altenbernd, & Stevens, 2003).

However, other studies have resulted in less positive findings regarding the effects of employment. One study found that for mothers with very little previous work experience, the risk of child welfare involvement actually increased as they entered the workforce (Nam et al., 2006). Other research has examined the employment status of the mother and found no relationship between employment status following exit from cash assistance and subsequent child welfare involvement (Courtney et al., 2005; Ovwigho et al., 2003). The lack of a significant relationship between employment status and child maltreatment in these studies may reflect the limited sensitivity of the employment variables in the study designs. However, another plausible explanation is that employment in and of itself isn’t as important as the amount of income earned in competitive employment (Courtney et al., 2005).

A handful of studies have explored the relationship between income and maltreatment. One study examining the experiences of welfare leavers found that while a mother’s employment status did not have a significant effect on the likelihood of experiencing a substantiated finding of child maltreatment, there was a relationship between the mother’s earnings and a decrease in risk (Ovwigho et al., 2003). Employment income also has a positive impact on reunification of children in foster care, with maternal employment predicting a quicker reunification (Wells & Guo, 2006).

The hypothesis that is being tested here is that maternal employment and earnings following exit from cash assistance will have an effect on the incidence of child maltreatment.

It is important to note that this study builds upon the existing research in several important ways. First, this study differs from previous studies in that it examines only those who are exiting TANF. Much of the earlier literature explores the characteristics and outcomes of families that were receiving cash assistance during the study period. Second, this study follows each family that exits from cash assistance for a period of two years, which is a longer period of time than several previous studies. Third, this study defines involuntary exit to include time limits. This is a concept which hasn't really been examined in relation to child maltreatment since the passage of TANF. Finally, this study follows families who exited TANF between 1999 and 2002. The end of the study period reflects the point at which families were first reaching the end of their time-limited benefits. In addition, this time period coincides with a period of recession in the economy, resulting in greater financial pressure on low-income families.

## **Methodology**

Families in this study include 18,023 female-headed households from Cuyahoga County, Ohio that exited TANF between January 1, 1999 and December 31, 2002 and who had a child that was 10 years of age or younger at the time of exit. The study utilizes secondary data from 1992 through 2004. The data for this study was obtained from five separate administrative data sets. The child maltreatment data was obtained from the county family services agency, public assistance data was obtained from county human services, birth record information was obtained from the state department of health, employment data came from the state department of employment services, and the final source was federal census data. Data from the five sources were compiled by the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development, a research center in the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University.

The dependent variable examined in this study was a substantiated or indicated finding of child maltreatment, including both abuse and neglect. Ohio is one of a handful of states that use indication as well as substantiation as a disposition outcome for investigations of alleged maltreatment. Substantiation refers to investigations in which the allegation of maltreatment was supported or founded by the criteria established in state law. An indicated disposition or finding occurs when the investigation does not result in sufficient evidence to substantiate maltreatment, but there is reason to suspect that maltreatment occurred or that the child is at risk of maltreatment (DHHS, 2004).

There were twenty-two predictive factors examined in this study. The factors fit into five conceptual categories. The conceptual categories were maternal characteristics,

child and family characteristics, employment, public assistance usage, and neighborhood characteristics. Factors that were of primary interest in this study were the effect of type of exit (voluntary or involuntary) from cash assistance on subsequent maltreatment and the effect of employment and earned income on subsequent maltreatment. Each family in the study was observed for a two-year period following their initial exit from TANF. An exit was defined as receipt of cash assistance followed by two consecutive months during which the family's file was closed. This definition is consistent with other studies of the experiences of families that exited cash assistance (Cancian, Haveman, Kaplan, & Wolfe, 1999; Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1999).

Cox proportional hazard models, a type of event history analysis, were used to examine the occurrence and timing of substantiated or indicated findings of child maltreatment following the families' initial exit from cash assistance. The Cox proportional hazards model analyzes an unobserved variable, commonly called a hazard rate, as the dependent variable. This rate is posited as the instantaneous probability of an event occurring (Guo, 2008). This model was especially appropriate as it permits the incorporation of time-varying independent variables and also permits the censoring of cases with non-events at the end of the observation period.

## Results

Descriptive data provides some context for the multivariate findings. Eighty-nine percent of the mothers who exited TANF were employed for at least one quarter during the two-year observation period. However, less than one-third (30.4%) were employed in each quarter during the two-year period. Earned income was quite low for the families. For the entire sample, the median earnings from employment were \$11,278 over the two-year period. Most leavers did not return to TANF, although 43% did receive additional TANF support for at least a short time period. Slightly more than half (54.4%) of the leavers experienced an involuntary exit from TANF.

Use of Medicaid and Food Stamp benefits following exit were quite high, with 93.4% of children using at least one month of Medicaid and 87.5% of families using at least one month of Food Stamps during the two-year examination period. Of the total sample, 2131 (11.8%) individuals experienced an investigation of child maltreatment during the observation period and of those who were investigated, 894 (5.0% of the total sample) individuals experienced a substantiated or indicated finding of child maltreatment (see Table 1).

Two multivariate models examining the effects of exit from cash assistance on a substantiated or indicated finding of child maltreatment were run. The first model incorporates monthly employment status as a dichotomous, time-varying variable (See Table 2). The overall chi-square for the model represents a strong overall fit ( $X^2$  (24,  $N$  =

18,016) = 214.77,  $p < .001$ ). Seven individual variables were significant. Two variables, number of individuals on file (.196, .037)<sup>1</sup> and involuntary exit (.233, .072), had coefficients that were positive in direction, indicating that the presence of or increase in these variables increased the risk that the family would experience a substantiated or indicated finding of child maltreatment. Three of the other variables, age of mother (-.029, .008), high school diploma (-.269, .072), and age of child (-.091, .018), had negative coefficients, indicating that the presence of or increase in these variables reduced the risk of a substantiated or indicated finding. Two time-varying variables, receipt of Food Stamps after exit (-.186, .085) and receipt of Medicaid after exit (.463, .097) were also significant. This indicates that for the months in which the family was receiving Food Stamps, the risk of a substantiated or indicated finding was reduced, while in months which the family was receiving Medicaid, the relative risk of a substantiated finding of maltreatment was increased.

The second model replaces employment status with earned income as a continuous, time-varying variable (See Table 3). The second model had an overall model fit of  $X^2(24, N = 18,016) = 229.24$ ,  $p < .001$ , representing a slightly improved fit over model one, which was developed with monthly employment status after exit as a dichotomous variable. A total of nine variables were significant in the second model. A number of the variables that were significant in model one continued to be significant in model two. These variables included age of the mother (-0.027, .008), receipt of high school diploma (-0.241, .073), and age of the child (-0.092, .018), which continued to have negative coefficients, indicating that the presence of or increase in these variables reduced the risk of a substantiated or indicated finding. Similarly, individuals on file (.201, .037), involuntary exit (.202, .072), and receipt of Medicaid after exit (.450, .098) all continued to have coefficients that were positive in direction, indicating that the presence of or increase in these variables increased the risk that the family would experience a substantiated or indicated finding of child maltreatment. Receipt of Food Stamps after exit (-.214, .085) also continued to be significant. One additional variable that was significant in model two, but was not in model one was the mother's history of working during the year prior to exit (.232, .087). Finally, while employment status was not significant on model one, monthly earned income (-0.022, .006) was significant in model two, indicating that as income increased in months in which the income was earned, the risk of a substantiated finding of maltreatment decreased.

## Utility for Social Work Practice

There are two main implications of this research. First, there is a clear inverse relationship between earned income and subsequent child maltreatment. For each

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<sup>1</sup> The coefficient and standard error are presented for each variable.

additional \$100 in earned income, the hazard of a substantiated or indicated finding of child maltreatment decreased by 2.2% in the month in which the income was earned. That would mean the hazard of having a substantiated finding is *two-thirds lower* for someone with a job earning \$30,000 / year compared to someone who is unemployed and has no income. Furthermore, employment status (whether or not someone was employed in any given month) was not a significant predictor in the model which examined the effect of employment status on maltreatment. This suggests that the type of job and the characteristics of the job (higher pay per hour, more hours scheduled per week) are more important factors than just having a job in and of itself. However, under the current federal policy, entry into employment through rapid labor force attachment is strongly encouraged, often with little consideration of the quality of the job.

The research presented here suggests that for social work practitioners working with TANF recipients, more emphasis should initially be placed on obtaining high quality jobs. However, for those individuals who do exit TANF and end up in lower quality jobs, more targeted, longer-term services are necessary to help them advance professionally and reach financial stability. Financial stability will, in turn, provide a less stressful environment for children to develop. These direct practice changes will require revised policies that permit states and counties to utilize approaches that emphasize job quality over caseload reductions. Clearly, social workers have a role as advocates for policy change at the national level, especially in light of the reauthorization of TANF scheduled for the fall of 2010.

There is empirical evidence to support these types of policy and practice changes. One of the best predictors of future income among women leaving cash assistance is the level of earnings from their initial employment after leaving cash assistance (Cancian & Meyer, 2000). The structured job search and limited educational approaches that are typically delivered by human service agencies tend to be less effective than programs that utilize more flexible, balanced approaches that offer a blend of job search, education, job training, and work activities with targeted focus on quality jobs (Strawn, Greenberg, & Savner, 2001). Focusing on quality employment will result in better financial outcomes, and less involvement with family services.

The second implication is regarding the families who experience an involuntary exit from TANF. More than half of the families studied experienced an exit that met this criterion. These families were at 22.5% greater risk of having an indicated or substantiated child maltreatment event than families who voluntarily exited TANF. There are three considerations here. The first consideration is related to social work practice. Families who experience involuntary exits tend to face multiple barriers that not only interfere with employment, but can also interfere with participation in the programs that are required to maintain benefits (Danziger, Corcoran, Danziger, & Heflin, 2000). Cutting these families off from financial support can create financial stressors which may

contribute to maltreatment. Social work has a commitment to ensuring the well-being of the clients we work with, especially those who are vulnerable. Social workers in human services settings need to be diligent in communicating with families to ensure that they fully understand programmatic requirements of TANF. This will help avoid scenarios where clients lose their financial assistance without understanding why that occurred (Beimers & Fischer, 2007). In addition, social workers can work to ensure that families are receiving access to benefits that are not associated with TANF, such as Medicaid, food assistance, or applying for the Earned Income Tax Credit and Supplemental Security Income. This type of service coordination should extend beyond material supports to include services that can address the core problems that may be limiting the mother's ability to work, such connecting the mother with substance abuse treatment, mental health services, or assistance in escaping violent domestic situations. Furthermore, social workers need to use their advocacy skills within agency settings to develop agency-level policies that support fragile families.

The second consideration here is for research. Women who experience an involuntary exit have much poorer employment outcomes than those who have voluntary exits. In this study, over the two year follow-up period, women who had a voluntary exit reported income from employment that was on average 50% greater than women who had involuntary exits. Currently, there is sparse research about these families that have experienced time-limited or sanctioned exits. We do know that this portion of the low-income population is growing and that these women typically have multiple barriers that make it difficult for them to be consistently employed (Blank, 2007). Examples of these multiple barriers include serious cognitive limits, mental and physical health issues, lack of community and social networks, and/or limited management and decision making skills (Pavetti & Kauff, 2006). Additional research is needed so that we can better understand the challenges faced by these families and specifically how these challenges are affecting the development and well-being of children in those families.

The final consideration is a policy response for those who experience an involuntary exit. There are multiple concerns about families who experience an involuntary exit. As this research shows, families who experience an involuntary exit are at greater risk of experiencing an indicated or substantiated finding of maltreatment. In addition, research shows that families who experience involuntary exits often have a greater number of barriers, which interfere with their employment. Third, these families are more likely to be "disconnected," that is, not receiving any income from employment or government programs. The overarching objective of the current federal policy is to move families off of welfare with little consideration for the well-being of the families. An appropriate policy response for this difficult to serve population is to allow states to experiment with interventions that focus on barrier amelioration. This would require waivers that permit states to continue providing financial support to families and providing funding for innovative strategies to support these families. Rather than



focusing on reduction in welfare caseloads, these interventions could set targets for barrier amelioration, progress towards employment, self-sufficiency, and child well-being.

What is clear from this research is that the well-being of low-income families and children has been set aside in the name of a reduction in welfare dependency. The relationship between type of exit from TANF and maltreatment and the relationship between employment earnings and maltreatment cannot be overlooked. The social work profession, with a charge to work towards a more socially just society, has a significant role to play through practice, research and policy development in ensuring that government programs like TANF do not have differential outcomes for low-income families but rather provide supports that will ensure opportunities for children and families.

Table 1.

*Predictors of substantiated or indicated child maltreatment after exit from TANF*

Variable	Total		Without substantiation		With substantiation	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Total sample	18023	100	17129	95.04	894	4.96
Age of mother (mean)*	27.1		27.15		26.13	
High school diploma *						
Yes	9853	54.67	9454	95.95	399	4.05
No	8170	45.33	7675	93.94	495	6.06
Individuals on file (mean)*	3.213		3.2		3.5	
Age of child (mean)*	2.524		2.55		1.99	
Birth order of child (mean)*	3.004		2.99		3.22	
Pre-natal tobacco use						
Yes	4064	22.55	3845	94.61	219	5.39
No	13959	77.45	13284	95.16	675	4.84
Pregnancy terminations (mean)	0.564		0.56		0.59	
Month prenatal care began (mean)	3.091		3.09		3.05	
Number of prenatal visits (mean)	9.947		9.95		9.81	
Birth weight (mean)	3178.654		3179.32		3165.94	
Weeks gestation (mean)	38.813		38.82		38.72	
Child race Black	13039	72.35	12385	94.98	654	5.02
Child race White	3666	20.34	3478	94.87	188	5.13
Child race Hispanic	1070	5.94	1028	96.07	42	3.93

Table 1.

*Predictors of substantiated or indicated child maltreatment after exit (continued)*

Variable	Total		Without substantiation		With substantiation	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Involuntary exit from TANF*						
Yes	9809	54.42	9254	94.34	555	5.66
No	8214	45.58	7875	95.87	339	4.13
Worked year prior to exit*						
Yes	14075	78.09	13370	94.99	705	5.01
No	3948	21.91	3759	95.21	189	4.79
Earnings following exit (mean)†	\$ 15,479		\$ 15,627		\$ 12,640	
Employment following exit (mean)†	16.077		16.16		15.36	
Months on TANF (mean)*	15.396		15.35		16.27	
TANF after exit (mean)†	3.662		3.65		3.81	
Medicaid after exit (mean)†	17.169		17.14		17.73	
Food Stamps after exit (mean)†	14.176		14.15		14.67	
Impoverishment (mean)	-0.002		-0.004		0.038	
Community instability (mean)	0.011		0.011		-0.002	
Childcare burden (mean)*	0.031		0.028		0.091	

\* p &lt; .05 (based upon Kaplan-Meier or univariate Cox regression).

† time varying variable; bivariate significance not calculated

Table 2.

*Model 1 - Predictors of substantiated child maltreatment following exit from TANF (employment as a dichotomous variable)*

Variable	Coefficient	SE	Wald	<i>p</i>	Hazard Ratio
Age of mother	-0.029	0.008	14.449	<.001	0.971
High school diploma (y/n)	-0.269	0.072	13.775	<.001	0.764
Individuals on file	0.196	0.037	28.062	<.001	1.216
Age of child	-0.091	0.018	25.991	<.001	0.913
Birth order of child	-0.017	0.034	0.249	0.618	0.983
Pre-natal tobacco use	0.132	0.085	2.409	0.121	1.141
Pregnancy terminations	0.069	0.049	1.979	0.160	1.071
Month prenatal care began	-0.032	0.020	2.513	0.113	0.968
Number of prenatal visits	-0.006	0.009	0.400	0.527	0.994
Birth weight	0.000	0.000	0.003	0.953	1.000
Weeks gestation	-0.016	0.019	0.709	0.400	0.984
Child race Black	0.181	0.325	0.309	0.578	1.198
Child race White	0.252	0.326	0.600	0.439	1.287
Child race Hispanic	-0.098	0.353	0.078	0.780	0.906
Involuntary exit from TANF	0.233	0.072	10.479	0.001	1.263
Worked year prior to exit	0.171	0.088	3.762	0.052	1.187
Worked following exit	-0.043	0.074	0.330	0.566	0.958
Months on TANF	0.008	0.005	2.066	0.151	1.008
TANF after exit	0.089	0.098	0.816	0.367	1.093
Medicaid after exit	0.463	0.097	22.618	<.001	1.589
Food Stamps after exit	-0.186	0.085	4.776	0.029	0.813
Impoverishment	0.021	0.044	0.237	0.626	1.022
Community instability	-0.043	0.035	1.551	0.213	0.958
Childcare burden	0.024	0.038	0.421	0.517	1.025
Likelihood ratio, $\chi^2$ (df)	214.768 (24)				

Table 3.

*Model 2 - Predictors of substantiated child maltreatment event following exit from TANF (continuous income)*

Variable	Coefficient	SE	Wald	p	Hazard Ratio
Age of mother	-0.027	0.008	12.916	<.001	0.973
High school diploma (y/n)	-0.241	0.073	10.998	0.001	0.786
Individuals on file	0.201	0.037	29.701	<.001	1.223
Age of child	-0.092	0.018	26.181	<.001	0.912
Birth order of child	-0.022	0.034	0.400	0.527	0.979
Pre-natal tobacco use	0.120	0.085	2.015	0.156	1.128
Pregnancy terminations	0.074	0.049	2.279	0.131	1.076
Month prenatal care began	-0.033	0.020	2.623	0.105	0.968
Number of prenatal visits	-0.005	0.009	0.334	0.564	0.995
Birth weight	0.000	0.000	0.013	0.909	1.000
Weeks gestation	-0.017	0.019	0.745	0.388	0.984
Child race Black	0.207	0.325	0.404	0.525	1.230
Child race White	0.252	0.326	0.600	0.439	1.287
Child race Hispanic	-0.087	0.353	0.060	0.806	0.917
Involuntary exit from TANF	0.202	0.072	7.796	0.005	1.224
Worked year prior to exit	0.232	0.087	7.164	0.007	1.261
Earnings following exit	-0.022	0.006	13.848	<.001	0.978
Months on TANF	0.006	0.005	1.354	0.245	1.006
TANF after exit	0.033	0.099	0.018	0.742	1.033
Medicaid after exit	0.450	0.098	21.304	<.001	1.568
Food Stamps after exit	-0.214	0.085	6.283	0.012	0.808
Impoverishment	0.020	0.044	0.208	0.649	1.020
Community instability	-0.044	0.035	1.606	0.205	0.957
Childcare burden	0.024	0.038	0.407	0.523	1.024
Likelihood ratio, $\chi^2$ (df)	229.238 (24)				

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